

## New Mythology: A Review of Luis A. Sahagun at the Chicago Cultural Center

FEBRUARY 26, 2020 BY RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS

Identity. What can one say? It's complicated. We are a collection of history, experience and trauma piled into a mass of complementary and conflicting elements that may (or may not) be understood by others, even ourselves. The sculptures of Luis A. Sahagun manifest this struggle.

Sahagun's exhibition, "Both Eagle and Serpent," at the Chicago Cultural Center, is a messy and unmonumental reflection on identity. Sahagun, who was born in Mexico but is now a U.S. citizen, strives to create a new mythology, including precolonial elements of Latinx culture and an emerging decolonial confrontation. The exhibition title references imagery from the Mexican flag, the eagle with a snake in its beak a symbol of Mexican history, migration and personal conflict.

Sculptures are wrought from jute rope, foam insulation, plywood, beads and what appears to be breakfast cereal, bound together with wire, glue and a wish. They emerge into semi-figurative assemblages, like golems from the clay. The artworks are not as elegant as those of Abraham Cruzvillegas, Sahagun's clear predecessor; his realist painting gestures lack necessary refinement. Still, the resultant artworks are primal amalgamations that hold deep magic.

"A Lost Conversation with an Old Angel" uses quotidian materials to create the echo of a human or animal head. Sahagun references the tools that immigrant workers might use on the job—cement, wood, foam. The sculpture erupts and boils from the surface of the wall. It is all energy and weight, floating from the surface, while yarn and rope, standing in for hair, droops and pulls the form downwards, like a metaphorical struggle against loss.

Nearby, Sahagun has built an altar in black wood and rope, including a collection of found materials—broken pottery, framed photos and bright, shiny mementos. Entitled "An Old God Renewed," it honors ancestors and the moon itself. This assemblage reminded me of traditional Mexican ofrendas and seemed to evoke prayer, a yearning to communicate with elements far beyond our reach.

Two monumental figurative sculptures dominate the galleries. A precarious figure falls backward as if mortally wounded. Arms outstretched, it appears Christ-like. The figure's eagle (or snake?) head is bedazzled in pearlescent beads, mouth agape. The planted foot of the figure is a Spanish galleon. Inscribed on the scrap wood of the arms are dashes that seem to count off the days of an incarceration. All told, the artwork decries a loss of culture and humanity, laden with the weight of colonial desecration.

"Pain is our North Star" also wrestles with the legacy of colonialism. On four legs, an abstracted figure with a ruffled pink collar bears a flag. Another figure rises up behind this nightmarish conquistador-cum-centaur. Smaller, with



Luis A. Sahagun, "Luces en La Sombra (Lights in the Shadow)." Beads, patipemba, amparo St. Michael, jute, acrylic, wood, antler, silicone & ink.



yellow rope for hair and a tree growing from its head, the second figure was reminiscent of a Sancho Panza sidekick to a sick and sad Don Quixote. Sahagun writes that this figure is a surrogate ancestor, but I saw only darkness. In the end perhaps that's all to the good. Sahagun's artwork is the epitome of conflict, between the self and the world as it is. (Rafael Francisco Salas)

*"Luis A. Sahagun: Both Eagle and Serpent,"  
The Chicago Cultural Center, 78 East  
Washington, through April 26.*